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# Super normal design for extra ordinary bodies

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We propose a new approach to disability-related design, at once radical and *unremarkable*. We challenge the assumption that the role of design need be either to draw attention away from impairment or else to focus attention on disability. We reject this polarisation as utterly simplistic. We propose a more nuanced alternative that has so much more in common with design in other everyday contexts, given that disability is part of the fabric of everyday life.

We advocate a meeting of disability and design in objects that are
created yet familiar;
self-assured yet understated;
unapologetic yet unremarkable.

We appropriate two concepts, introduced in other manifestos – from disability studies, the notion of the 'extraordinary' body; from design practice the category of 'super normal' design. These terms were originally conceived by their authors (Garland-Thomson, 1997; Fukasawa & Morrison, 2007) with the intent of repositioning their respective fields. In colliding them, it is our intent to reframe the relationship between disability and design.

We present our case under the following headings:
1. Beyond tragedy and triumph
2. Introducing super normal design
3. The paradox of super normal
4. Reintroducing extraordinary bodies
5. Appropriating super normal
6. Towards super normal disability objects

## Beyond tragedy and triumph

For too much of the twentieth century, a clinical approach to disability resulted in prostheses in supposedly flesh-coloured paint or plastic and wheelchairs reminiscent of hospital beds, the assumption being that disability is something to be treated, cured, fixed, ideally removed or else pragmatically hidden. Within this framework, disability objects might be viewed as being entirely functional or else disguised.

In the late twentieth century, this perspective was retrospectively identified as a 'medical model of disability', which those disability objects could be said to embody. A 'social model' of disability was proposed in its place, in which impairment and disability were not so easily conflated. The case was made that disabled people were denied full social participation not directly by their impairments but because society does not accommodate these impairments. The model further argued that, in being excluded in this way, disabled people could be considered an oppressed group in society.

This conviction that disability is an inherent and positive part of any individual's identity inspired new approaches to disability objects. For example, the social model of disability might be said to be embodied in eye-catching custom prosthetic legs and brightly-coloured hearing aids as 'fashion statements' – a shamelessness that can itself be a powerful political stance. Indeed, the realisation that the role of disability objects can be critical – to provoke reflection about disability – just as much as clinical, has of course been a positive development. Yet whilst this broadens the choices available to disabled people, we see a yawning gap between these extremes. Disabled people have diverse and complex attitudes towards their own disability yet this nuance is not reflected in such a polarised choice.

When the journalist Peter White interviewed other disabled people on BBC radio (1994–2007), the series was entitled *No triumph, no tragedy*. Alison Lapper, Ian Dury and others discussed their disability, yet these conversations were not about disability as much as about each individual life, of which disability was just an important part. A stance of no triumph, no tragedy seems rarely to be reflected in disability objects however – an implied shame associated with the disguise of

cosmetic hands might appear tragic, whilst bionic hands are often framed within a superhuman narrative that can seem triumphalist.

In disability studies, this dichotomy between a social model of disability and a medical model is now being questioned. Scholars such as the sociologist Tom Shakespeare (2002) have challenged the social model as not reflecting the complexity of the lived experience of disability because "in practice, social and individual aspects are almost inextricable". We call for a more complex and nuanced framing of the role of design. And we find, in a design movement as yet unconnected to disability, a model to reflect and embody this lived everyday experience.

## Introducing super normal design

The category of super normal was proposed in 2006 by the Japanese industrial designer Naoto Fukasawa and the British product and furniture designer Jasper Morrison. An exhibition and associated book, *Super normal: sensations of the ordinary* (2007), celebrated 210 objects that embodied and epitomised ordinariness. Each of the objects was in some way everyday. Some were items of domestic furniture – chairs, shelf units and coat hangers. Some were utensils associated with cooking, eating or drinking – a chopping board, wine glasses and ashtrays. Others were household tools – a measuring tape, spanners and a pencil sharpener. They also encompassed a range of technologies, from ballpoint pens and notepads to mobile phones. All could be considered functional, yet at the same time cultural. Objects owned in order to use, and to use on an everyday basis.

In each case a specific object was chosen rather than an arbitrary example of the type. And, critically, the objects were chosen on their own terms rather than in order to represent a category. In this way, some product types were represented by more than one example, others were absent altogether – there were two soy sauce dispensers, yet no coffee grinder. This was because it was the super normal *qualities* of the object that were important, the *way in which* each epitomised its own category, rather than the ubiquity of the category that was being represented. What they have in common is design excellence, yet unusually combined with an apparent familiarity that means that their design quality can be easily overlooked. Many appear to be

inevitable rather than consciously created, with a timelessness that implies that they have existed for some time, and will continue to endure.

Fukasawa and Morrison attribute the origin of the term to a particular incident in 2005 – Fukasawa had designed a series of aluminium stools for the Italian design company Magis which were being exhibited at the Milan furniture fair. He describes how, when he went to see the display, he had found people sitting on his stools, not even realising they were exhibits, in contrast to the other pieces of furniture drawing attention under the spotlights. People seemed not to realise that they were design pieces. Fukasawa admits to being a little shocked, even a little depressed by this because, if anything, designers tend to live in fear of people saying their designs are "nothing special". But Morrison contacted Fukasawa to say that he'd seen the stools and far from consoling him, congratulated him on this quality, which a colleague of theirs, Takeshi Okutani, had referred to as "super normal". The appeal that the two had long cherished in ordinary things now had a name.

But the intent of the super normal manifesto goes beyond the celebration of ordinary objects – its more important role was to challenge a crude common conception of design, the use of the term design to mean something added, distinct, noticeable. Instead, it seeks to reposition great design as aspiring instead to fit into our everyday lives, to become an unremarkable part of the whole.

## The paradox of super normal

To reposition design in this way, there was a need to remark on the unremarkable, in order to illuminate and emphasise subtleties that can be overlooked and undervalued. For Fukasawa, normal is the situation where something has blended comfortably into our lives, and super normal is the epitome of this. This distinction between normal and super normal is important – super normal was a carefully curated collection, not just a random sample of innumerable ordinary things. That is, it is not just their ordinariness, but their *extra* ordinariness that counts.

Interviewing Fukasawa and Morrison (2007), editor of *Domus* magazine and curator Francesca Picchi identifies the linguistic ambiguity of super normal – that it could be

taken as meaning something that goes *beyond* normal "(if we consider the Latin meaning: *super* = above, beyond)" but also as something that is conversely just really, really normal, "that concentrates all quality on normality, and expresses a kind of extra normality (if we consider the Anglo-Saxon use of super as an adjective)". As Morrison puts it:

> If you went into a shop looking for a dining plate, it would be the most plate-like plate you could find. Even more plate-like than you could imagine a plate to be. What's good about a more than plate-like plate is that it will do its job without messing up the atmosphere in the way that designer tableware might do.

Here Morrison is using the word designer as an adjective, to mean the same misrepresentation of design that he is seeking to challenge, and therefore, to him, in a pejorative sense. He continues, saying "The same can be applied to almost any category of object". Including disability objects therefore. Being plate-like implies the importance of archetypes that transcend any single instance of an object – patterns for designs that might evolve yet at the same time endure. Yet another paradox of super normal is that whilst it identifies archetypal forms, these archetypes need not be definitive. So there ended up being seven chairs, chairs being a perennial design standard through which nuanced philosophies of design are played out.

It is therefore worth mentioning in the context of our manifesto that whilst many of the objects were global, others were not – soy sauce bottles were among several quintessentially Japanese objects that would be read differently by a Japanese or a non-Japanese audience or consumer. The nuances of super normal therefore play out differently within a culture and across cultures, and so disability-related super normal design would also play out differently when applied to objects associated with a specific disability or to universal design, differently within Deaf culture and a wider population of hearing impaired people, as well as differently across different cultures defined in terms *other than* disability.

There were also different routes by which an object had become super normal. Some, like an everyday French café wineglass, were the result of decades if not centuries of evolution, in which the hand of any individual designer was transcended by a traditional, vernacular form. Others, like a bicycle for Japanese manufacturer

Muji, were individually authored, yet with similar qualities deliberately in the mind of the designer. Some objects were credited to famous designers, such as Alvar Aalto, Ettore Sottsass as well as Fukasawa and Morrison themselves, whilst other classes of object tend to be anonymously credited to their manufacturers.

In several ways, super normal resonates with the philosophy of Dieter Rams, the design director of German manufacturer Braun from 1961 until 1995 (Lovell, 2011). Influential within industrial design, Rams published his *Ten principles for good design*, the most famous of which is the tenth – "Good design is as little design as possible" (Rams, 1985). It continues, "Less, but better, because it concentrates on the essential aspects and the products are not burdened with non-essentials. Back to purity, back to simplicity". This echo of architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's adoption of "less is more" in connection with modernist architecture might imply an emphasis on minimalism, which would be a simplistic reading because, taken together, it is in the tensions and paradoxes between the principles that their richness lies.

The third principle states that "Good design is aesthetic", and goes on, "The aesthetic quality of a product is integral to its usefulness because products are used every day and have an effect on people and their well-being. Only well-executed objects can be beautiful". And yet the fifth principle retorts "Good design is unobtrusive. Products fulfilling a purpose are like tools. They are neither decorative objects nor works of art. Their design should therefore be both neutral and restrained, to leave room for the user's self-expression" (Rams, 1985). The principles continue to tread a fine line between aspiring to appear almost un-designed, yet at the same time being skilfully and sophisticatedly resolved. So, whilst good design is as little design as possible, nonetheless "Good design is consequent to the last detail". This eighth principle introduces an ethical thread, "Nothing must be arbitrary or left to chance. Care and accuracy in the design process show respect towards the consumer" (Rams, 1985). "Indifference towards people and the reality in which they live is actually the one and only cardinal sin in design" (Lovell, 2011).

It is apt that Rams' work is included in the super normal exhibition – object no. 85 is Rams' universal shelving system 606 for British furniture manufacturer Vitsoe.

Although, in one regard, super normal design is often in contradiction with his first principle, "Good design is innovative" because, where Rams ends with "as little design as possible", often super normal design involves as little *innovation* as possible.

## *Reintroducing extraordinary bodies*

This complexity and contradictions of 'super' and 'normal' are perhaps clearer in the juxtaposition of the related words 'extra' and 'ordinary', and the inherent word play between extra-ordinary and extraordinary. Extra and super, ordinary and normal conflate.

In disability studies, the term extraordinary of course is a reference to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's text *Extraordinary bodies: Figuring physical disability in American culture and literature* (1997). This illuminates the ways in which disability was used to define and privilege normality, that an idea – a supposed ideal – of the 'normal' body required disabled people to be excluded and oppressed. In this way, far from being a neutral statistical concept, the normal is inherently divisive and political. Garland-Thomson notes that the group who meet the narrow criteria of the idealised norm is a very small minority, if it could be said to exist at all. Referring to Erving Goffman's theory of stigmatisation (Goffman, 1963) that "reveals the illusory, ideological nature of the normate subject position" (Garland-Thomson, 1997), it is a truism that what is socially sanctioned as 'normal' is variable and complex.

"Naming the figure of the normate" was used by Garland-Thomson as a conceptual strategy to move beyond the simple dichotomies of male/female, white/black, straight/gay or able-bodied/disabled "so that we can examine the subtle interrelations among social identities that are anchored to physical differences" (Garland-Thomson, 1997). It is therefore not just the consideration of the normal that resonates with super normal design, it is also the rejection of simple dichotomies and an attention to subtleties. In her manifesto, Garland-Thomson's expressed aim was to move disability from the realms of medicine into that of political minorities, to recast it from a form of pathology to a form of ethnicity. The super normal does not imply this political stance, yet with its focus of design being subsumed into everyday life, it blurs

the distinction between design and everything else, just as Garland-Thomson sought to move beyond the distinction between disability as a medical issue as opposed to a rich part of everyday life.

*Appropriating super normal design*

Given the inherently divisive notion of the normal, super normal could seem a reckless term to introduce into a manifesto for disability studies. We can hardly excuse it on the basis that it was conceived without any connotation of disability in mind – the irony and ambiguity of the word normal was intentional, but Morrison and Fukasawa are referring to the object, not to any person who might use it. Yet the relationship between the object and the person – the deference of the object to the person – is at the heart of their definition, and appropriate in our case as well.

We might have coined the term extra ordinary design instead, with the intention of sidestepping this controversy, but such a neologism would have less currency with practising designers, and it is this community too that we need to engage and include if we are to succeed in our aims. For it is not only disabled people that have been conspicuous by their absence in most disability-related design, but also card-carrying art school-trained designers. Which is why so much that passes for disability-related design is so inept, so mediocre, and therefore on Dieter Rams' terms, so disrespectful.

In the context of disability studies, the term super normal is a found object, picked up in one culture and brought to another. This very unfamiliarity, even its jarring, could be usefully thought-provoking. So we advocate adopting super normal, in the short term at least… at least until we have agreed on a better alternative.

In her manifesto, Garland-Thomson used the freak show as a lens to view disability because of its "framing of the extraordinary body as at once wondrous and repellent" (Garland-Thomson, 1997). The combination of the two, repellent and wondrous, is insightful, since the two are not so easily separated and both can be divisive. Our intent too is to challenge at once the wondrous and repellent. Above all, we reject the assumption that the antithesis of a repellent disability object is necessarily a

wondrous disability object. We need more nuanced alternatives because only these can reflect the subtleties and refinement of people's everyday relationships with their disability.

The trouble with wondrous disability objects is that they can imply a transformative arc of triumph over tragedy. That this narrative is all too dominant is reflected in the title and stance of Peter White's aforementioned programme *No triumph, no tragedy.* Many other disabled people feel that this expectation is imposed upon them. Instead, super normal objects, through their own unremarkable evolution, leave people the room to do the same. Super normal objects just are. Super normal objects are accepted (if not always appreciated) for all that they are and are not expected to be anything else besides. "We would like to evolve unremarkably" says Liz Jackson (personal communication, July 6, 2017), Founder of the Inclusive Fashion & Design Collective.

## *Towards super normal disability objects*

If we might be able to picture a super normal plate, then what about a super normal hearing aid, pair of glasses, wheelchair, walking cane, prosthetic hand? What would it take for each of these to be adeptly designed and, at the same time, be just a hearing aid, etc?

We imagine a super normal hearing aid that is beautifully resolved in form, materials and details – to the degree that eyewear is – yet unmistakably, unashamedly and unremarkably a hearing aid. Not as an ironic statement in anti-design but as an object with positive connotations. This might draw on an expanded yet more nuanced palette of materials that could be discrete and understated against different shades of human skin and hair, yet not purporting to *be* human skin – materials that sit well on the skin, such as cellulose acetates and horn employed in eyewear. With an equivalent attention to materials, form and detailing, the iconic form of the behind the ear hearing aid could be reclaimed. Because different super normal archetypes can co-exist within the same category of object, alternative super normal hearing aids are possible. At the time of writing, the imminent launch of an Apple hearing device is rumoured. If this happens, it will create stronger connections between assistive

technology and mainstream consumer electronics, a hearing device as universal design rather than dedicated to deaf people. The notion of super normal would play out differently in a universal object (and universal design is not the same as super normal design). Arguably Apple's brand is too self-conscious, its design language too exquisite, not mundane enough, to be considered completely super normal. Yet whilst a universal hearing device would undoubtedly make a positive contribution to the choices available to deaf people and the discourse around deafness, there are complex issues around the legibility of invisible disabilities and passing which mean that this might not represent the inevitable evolution of hearing aids for everyone. Whilst for some in the Deaf community, *any* hearing aid is anathema, for others a hearing aid might be read as a defiant badge of Deaf identity. A super normal hearing aid could be such a badge, without necessarily being a strident statement. In Heather Dawn Evans' definition of *un/covering*, this differs from both passing and masquerading (an exaggeration or faking of impairment) in that "it is simply a reminder […] of one's differentness" (Evans, 2017). Evans defines un/covering as being "articulated through words or actions, not prosthetics". We believe that super normal objects could nonetheless play a role, within the tone of voice that un/covering implies, which is why we are already exploring the notion of super normal hearing aids.

In this endeavour we are encouraged by the precedent of super normal glasses. This is the one area of disability-related design that has matured, culturally, to the point where it is possible to wear spectacles that are exceptionally well designed and at the same time are no big deal. The distinctions are nuanced, yet widely understood – these thick black squarish frames, whilst visually strong, nonetheless reference the everyman, blue collar, white collar or pink collar, whereas those thick black perfectly round frames allude to iconic modernist architects and are a statement piece. Widely shared, yet not universally, these interpretations are themselves culturally influenced. Yet if glasses do not identify their wearer as myopic or hyperopic so much as in other terms, super normal glasses are those that come closest to timeless understatement.

We also anticipate super normal wheelchairs evolving from several different approaches. Because, if super normal draws on archetypes, in the case of a wheelchair it is not obvious where to find those archetypes. Paralympic wheelchairs

are one ideal from which all wheelchairs could be derived, but everyday bicycles and domestic chairs provide complementary reference points, each more appropriate to other contexts and better suited to different people who use wheelchairs. Interestingly, the original super normal exhibition included examples of each. A bicycle by Japanese manufacturer Muji, in which as many superfluous parts as possible had been removed, was described in the exhibition catalogue as being not as cool or as serious as a sports bicycle, rather "a 'bicycle-like' bicycle, suited to taking a ride around one's neighbourhood" (Fukasawa & Morrison, 2007). The chair being a perennial design standard, the collection also included various chairs by Fukasawa, Ronan & Erwin Bouroullec, Morrison and others in beech wood, steel and polypropylene, diverse yet everyday materials. Fukasawa had explicitly set himself the challenge of designing a super normal chair, a chair-like chair, claiming "If you ask people, 'What exactly is chair-like?', they don't know, but if they see it, they can say, 'Oh, that's chair-like'; this sensation is one that, at first glance, appears inconsistent" (Fukasawa & Morrison, 2007). Historically, early wheelchairs were made by furniture makers and so they inherited a common language of materials and construction details from the furniture around them, they were very 'chair-like'. This is a relationship that has been lost (Pullin, 2009). A wheelchair is no longer just a chair with wheels and, whilst there are all kinds of clinical and technical reasons why this could be seen as progress, at the same time it has separated us – super normal, on the contrary, is design that connects us all.

We celebrate super normal walking canes that shed any medical connotations of crutches and hospital wards but without re-introducing the flamboyance of a nineteenth century dandy's cane or being nostalgic in other ways. Rie Norregaard's cane for Omhu does just that. The materials she employed make connections to other products – a handle of Baltic birch that is familiar from skateboards, a stock that echoes the diameter and painted finish of a bicycle frame, a ferrule of the same rubber as the sole of a Timberland boot. In referencing other objects, it makes connections to other parts of its owner's life. At the same time, it could be said to blend more comfortably into the lives of people who don't use a cane – or don't yet. It makes connections with other people, whilst remaining a bold, archetypal walking cane.

We imagine a super normal prosthetic hand that eschews both flesh-coloured silicone and high-tech carbon fibre. We challenge an engineering perspective in which material choices might be framed as being wholly functional, in this context, because any technology is freighted with cultural associations. Robotic hands when worn with their mechanisms and materials on view allude to science fiction – indeed have been described, proudly, as 'Terminator hands' by some amputees for whom this is a positive association. Hands of X is exploring alternatives, together with wearers who neither feel comfortable with the deception of a cosmetic hand, nor wish to be co-opted as poster children for a transhuman future (Kimmelman, 2018); wearers for whom a bespoke wearable sculpture co-created with the Alternative Limb Company, however exquisite, would be too loud a statement. Hands of X is drawing on a deeper culture of materials worn and handled and a palette of everyday materials – not in order to be radical but rather as reassuringly familiar. We therefore imagine prosthetic hands that are as unremarkable as they could ever be, without being invisible or otherwise apparently what they are not. Objects that nonetheless repay closer scrutiny and become more meaningful, yet at the same time become more normal, with use and familiarity.

## The manifesto: the next stages

i. Discussing super normal, in all its connotations, within disability studies.

ii. Engaging with disabled people for whom the notion of 'no triumph, no tragedy' and also super normal resonate.

iii. Recruiting designers whose studio practice already relates to super normal *and is of the highest quality*, and who are prepared to approach disability-related projects as they would any other.

iv. Commissioning exploratory projects that apply super normal design to particular disability objects.

v. Exhibiting these projects, disseminating their processes, participation and outcomes.

vi.  Developing a more nuanced critical narrative (which may or may not continue to use the term super normal) in disability studies and beyond.

We propose a collection of pioneering super normal disability objects that explore and come to embody this manifesto. We predict that it is these objects that will influence change, becoming more widely distributed, more accessible and more engaging than this manifesto itself. Yet, at the same time, such objects will deepen the critical discourse about disability-related design.

This manifesto is of course a challenge, and it asks for a response. This subtle revolution will require the participation of disabled people, designers and makers, researchers, policy-makers and entrepreneurs. We invite your active support.

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